

Hannah Arendt on the Relationship Between Education and Political Action

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“Is Political Education an Oxymoron? Hannah Arendt’s Resistance to Public Spaces in Schools” raises a number of crucial questions about the significance of Arendt’s conception of political action for education. It also raises important questions about the extent to which pedagogical environments can be considered to be public spaces in Arendt’s understanding of the term. In this essay, I want to consider two of Schutz’s worries about the educational dimensions of Arendt’s theory of political action. His first concern has to do with Arendt’s claim that our capacity for political action is rooted in “the conditions of human existence — life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth.”¹ Because we are conditioned to act, it seems that action need not be “taught.” Arendt’s reflections on education in her essay “The Crisis in Education,” seem to reinforce this idea when she warns against the conflation of educational spaces with political spaces. She goes so far as to object to the phrase “political education” because she regards the relationship between ruler and ruled that is proper to education as antithetical to the spirit of equality that defines the political realm properly conceived. Schutz rightly wonders how Arendt expects children to make the transition from being taught about the world to sharing responsibility for the world. This is his second worry. He proposes that Arendt’s theory of political action is useful to education only to the extent that it acknowledges that participation in public life is a “learned practice.” To say that a practice is learned is not, of course, to suggest that it need be formally taught, but Schutz does think that it is important for us to consider how political action is learned and to ask how it might be learned in school.

First, what does it mean to say, as Arendt does, that the capacity for action is conditioned by what she calls “the facts” of plurality and natality? While Schutz is right to note that Arendt did not think through the educational significance of her conception of action, it is not quite right to see this as a consequence of a quasi-naturalistic conception of political action. Arendt was all too aware of the fragility of action, which is why she wanted to grasp its almost miraculous capacity to reappear from time to time in ways that have altered the course of human affairs. At the same time, however, she wants to attend to the ease with which the capacity for action recedes from cultural memory. It might be useful to explore in more detail what Arendt means when she attempts to ground action in “the facts” of plurality and natality. Natality — the human capacity to act on the world in ways that are unexpected — is the “ontological root” of action. The arrival of each new person into the world holds open the hope that something new might begin, which is why natality is a condition of action. It makes action possible, but it does not guarantee it. Arendt reminds us that “the chances that tomorrow will be like yesterday are always overwhelming,” which is why the eruption of action is all the more remarkable.² Already we see that to say that natality is a *condition* of action is not to say that action

is a given, although it is always a possibility. The same applies to the condition of plurality. Plurality is Arendt's shorthand term for what Margeret Canovan has called the "platitudinous but philosophically revolutionary" observation "that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."³ Arendt regards plurality as the "predicament from which politics must start." It is a condition of politics in the sense that it makes politics both necessary and possible. As Arendt points out, if we were all exactly the same, we would have little need to make our differences of perspective and opinion known to others. But in the absence of political spaces, our differences in perspective would have no bearing on the shape of the shared world. Plurality refers then to the simple fact of human multiplicity and to the more complex process through which the common world comes into being and is sustained. Herein lies the paradox of plurality: the very condition that motivates and sustains action is dependent on action for its continued existence. Plurality is thus both the impetus for politics and a distinctively political achievement.

Lisa Disch wonders why Arendt chose to use the term *condition* in such an ambiguous way. At times, Arendt suggests that plurality is a *fact* of human existence while at other times she acknowledges its more tentative status as a *political* condition. Disch suggests that "Arendt's ambiguous use of the term *condition* is inherently conservative because it constructs political guarantees that are the *achievements* of democratic politics as 'givens' of the human condition."⁴ I want to suggest we might better understand this "ambiguity" as a constitutive paradox of political life. As a *human condition*, plurality is a given, but as a *condition of politics*, plurality is in the paradoxical situation of making politics possible at the same time as politics is its own condition of possibility.

All of this boils down to the distressing fact that the conditions of politics are a necessary but decidedly fragile basis for political action. It also explains why the capacity for action is so easily eclipsed by the other human activities: the need for sustenance, the desire for meaningful work and the search for fulfilling relationships in private and social life. As I read it, *The Human Condition* is less an unbridled celebration of action than an excavation of the ways in which action has been overshadowed by other aspects of the *vita activa*.

There are a number of other reasons why political action is such a fragile phenomenon. All have a bearing on what it might mean to educate for political life. First, there is not a tradition through which we might trace the history of political action as Arendt understands it. Arendt begins her preface to *Between Past and Future* with a curious quotation from the writings of Rene Char, the French writer who had fought in the *resistance*: "our inheritance was left to us by no testament."⁵ Confronted by a "totally unexpected event" — the collapse of France under Nazi occupation — the men and women who joined the French resistance discovered anew what it means to act: "they had become "challengers," had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear."⁶ Second, once initiated, action is a risky endeavor. Once an act is set in motion, its effects are boundless and unpredictable. *On Revolution* examines the anxieties of the founders

of the newly independent American nation about the fact that their actions had brought about such momentous changes. It seems that no sooner had the revolution been won than the revolutionary leadership set about establishing a constitution that could contain and stabilize the effects of their actions. There are hazards to acting politically. Once an act is initiated, it is out of the actor's control. The inevitable risks of action lead most of us to refrain from acting, which is a third reason why action is best understood as a political achievement rather than as a given of human existence. Because action is not inevitable, when it happens it "looks like a miracle." Arendt calls action "the one miracle-working faculty of man."⁷

The fact that the absence of a tradition of political action did not prevent people like Rene Char from joining forces with other challengers in the French resistance indicates that there is a strain in Arendt's conception of action that might lead to the conclusion that action need not be taught; when it happens, it is a spontaneous occurrence. The trouble is that political action properly understood — the kind that challenges — happens so rarely that we cannot presume that it is in any sense inevitable. Indeed, the outstanding political lessons of the last century testify to the tragic consequences of political inaction as witnessed in the absence of protest in Nazi Germany in the years leading up to the war. It is precisely against this backdrop that Arendt wants to recover "the lost treasure" of political action. Her aim is to leave "a testament" that preserves those aspects of the tradition that must be passed on if we are to guard against the "failure of memory" that has had such tragic consequences in our century. Cultivating "mini-publics" in the classroom is one way to do this, to be sure, but such stagings minimize the risks of politics, as perhaps they must given our obligation to create safe learning environments for our students.

How then can educators prepare students for political action in ways that better allay Arendt's concern about the conflation of educational with political spaces? And, to attend to Schutz's Deweyan concerns, how do we ensure that the political not be so cordoned off from education that we lose sight of the need to facilitate a transition from the relative safety of educational spaces to the risks of the wider world? One way to do this is through the curriculum via the telling of stories that leave the kind of testament that was not available to members of the resistance and thus had to be discovered anew by them. In the spirit of Arendt's ruminations on teaching in "the gap between past and future" in "The Crisis in Education," rather than monumentalizing the past as education tends to do, such a testament would have to "preserve newness," by no means a simple undertaking.⁸

Schutz is right to note that an education for public life cannot rely on a naturalistic understanding of political action. Political action does not spring from nothing; it emerges when individuals and groups of people realize that something has gone terribly wrong, and when they recognize that they have the power to make things right. Schutz has traced an important strand of Arendt's project, namely to show how it is that, at various points in modern history, individuals and groups have managed to rediscover the "lost treasure" of political action. Intertwined with this strand of thought is a related line of inquiry: how it is that the "inheritance" invoked by Rene Char has tended not to be passed on? Why it is that we have been left only

the sketchiest legacy of it, both in our curricula and in the culture at large? This line of inquiry changes our understanding of Arendt. She becomes a genealogist rather than a naturalist, a shift that reminds us of the important role education plays in the protection of public life even if we are discouraged from turning schools into political spaces as Arendt understands them.

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1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 11.
 2. Arendt "What is Freedom?," *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 170.
 3. Margeret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 110-11.
 4. Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 54-9.
 5. Arendt, "Preface: The Gap Between Past and Future," *Between Past and Future*, 3.
 6. *Ibid.*, 4.
 7. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.
 8. Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," *Between Past and Future*, 193. See also my essay, "Teaching in the Midst of Belatedness: The Paradox of Natality in Hannah Arendt's Educational Thought," in *Educational Theory* 47, no. 4 (1997): 435-51.